

THE WORD OF THE CROSS - PART I
THE SON OF MAN IS LIFTED UP
The Cross Can Be Offensive

September 13, 2009
Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Cross
Revision G

GOSPEL: John 3:13-17
EPISTLE: Galatians 6:11-18

The Exaltation of the Cross is a feast day that is not celebrated much in the West. Some western churches celebrate Holy Cross Sunday in mid September using today’s Gospel lesson and the Epistle for the feast day of the Exaltation. But this is not commonly done. Lutherans sometimes use the Epistle lesson for the Sunday after the Exaltation for Reformation Sunday in November. In both cases, the ideas are expressed that the Cross has become more than just a piece of wood that the Lord died on. However, neither emphasize the Word of the Cross as it is in the Eastern Church. In the West, both Holy Cross Sunday and Reformation Sunday are one-day events. In the East, the celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross takes in two Sundays (today and the Sunday after the Exaltation) with a major feast day in between. In addition to the above, taking up one’s cross is also the theme of the 3rd Sunday in Lent (The Adoration of the Cross) and All Saints Sunday (the 1st Sunday after Pentecost).

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What is the Word of the Cross?

The “Word of the Cross” is a literal translation of 1 Corinthians 1:18, which is often mistranslated “the message of the Cross”. In Greek, the word *logos* is used, just as in, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Other Greek words existed that mean “message”, such as *rhema*: a message or matter, and *kerugma*: a message or proclamation. One example is, while Peter was speaking to Cornelius, the text reads, “While Peter was still speaking this message (*rhema*), the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the Word (*logos*).” Another

example is the words of the angel to the Apostles when he let them out of prison (Acts 5:20), “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words (*rhema* or messages) of this life”. One can listen to a message (*rhema*) of this life and not hear the Word, depending on the condition of one’s heart.

Thus, the Word of the Cross is not just a message; it is part of the fabric of Christianity. If one misses the Word, one misses God. If one misses the Word of the Cross, one misses God’s ways.

In summary, the Word of the Cross is (from 1 Corinthians 1:18):

- Foolishness to those who are perishing. We put the entire hope for our life and being in the teachings of a crucified Jew. To the wisdom of this world, this is utter stupidity.
- To those who are being saved, however, it is the Power of God.

Why this is the case and the implications of it are the subject of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and the Sundays before and after. There is much depth to this also. It is the Wisdom of God in mystery that was hidden before the Crucifixion. Had the rulers of this age (Satan and his legions) known this mystery, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). It was contrary to the logic of this age to think that victory was getting crucified. As we humble ourselves and take up our Crosses, similar things happen. We attain a victory that we find difficult to predict in advance, and one that we wouldn’t think was possible at all.

Gospel: John 3:13-17

The setting for the Gospel lesson is Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus by night in late 27 AD, or about 2 1/2 years before the Crucifixion. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin (John 3:1, 10). Two years later in October 29 AD, Nicodemus spoke in defense of Jesus, but was ridiculed and shouted down by the others (John 7:45-52). Finally, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (another member of the Sanhedrin, Mark 15:43) performed the burial rite for Jesus (John 19:38-42) and were expelled from the council, imprisoned, and later exiled¹. In our Gospel reading, Nicodemus recognized that he was witnessing something utterly phenomenal in his midst: “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2; compare also John 12:42-43).

Christ’s Omnipresence

Jesus proceeded to tell Nicodemus of baptism and being born again (John 3:3-6), which Nicodemus couldn’t understand (John 3:9). Jesus continued with the text of our Gospel lesson to tell Nicodemus of heavenly things (John 3:12). Specifically, Jesus told him that He had come down from heaven (John 3:13), and although He was obviously standing in front of Nicodemus, He was also in heaven. His purpose in becoming incarnate was to be lifted up as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness (John 3:14). This involved not just earthly things but heavenly things (John 3:12). Later (late 29 AD), Jesus spoke to the scribes and Pharisees again, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM” (John 8:28). I AM is the Name God gave

¹ Joseph ended up as Bishop of Britain and is the focal point of numerous Holy Grail legends. Nicodemus died while lamenting the death of the Deacon Stephen and was buried by Gamaliel in Gamaliel’s own tomb.

Moses for Himself at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Thus, when Joseph and Nicodemus saw Jesus lifted up (i.e. crucified), they understood what He had said, and they knew what they had to do, no matter what the personal consequences.

Heretics throughout the ages have had a lot of difficulty understanding what Jesus said. John Cassian, addressing the heresies of Nestorius, brought up² some of these problems that the heretics had with the life of Christ. For example, Mary gave birth to Jesus even though He lived before her; Christ, the Author of life, was deprived of life at the Crucifixion; and Jesus was in heaven at the same time that He was on earth, as He mentioned to Nicodemus.

“For if it can seem to you unreasonable that Mary could give birth to God who lived before her, how will it seem reasonable that God was crucified by men? And yet the same God, who was crucified, Himself predicted, ‘Shall a man afflict God, for you afflict Me?’ (Malachi 3:8 LXX) If then we cannot think that the Lord was born of a Virgin because He who was born lived before her who bore Him, how can we believe that God had blood? And yet it was said to the Ephesian elders, ‘Feed the Church of God which He has purchased with His own Blood’ (Acts 20:28). Finally how can we think that the Author of life was Himself deprived of life? And yet Peter says, ‘You have killed the Author of life’ (Acts 3:15). No one who is set on earth can be in heaven. Yet how does the Lord Himself say, ‘The Son of man who is in heaven?’ (John 3:13) If then you think that God was not born of a Virgin because the one who is born must be of one substance with the one who bears, how will you believe that different things can be produced from different natures? Thus according to you the wind did not suddenly bring the quail (Numbers 11:31-35), nor did the manna fall (Exodus 16:13-36), nor was water turned into wine (John 2:5-10) nor were many thousands of men fed with a few loaves (Matthew 14:15-21), nor did the blind man receive his sight after the clay had been put on him (John 9:1-11). All these things seem incredible and contrary to nature. Since we believe that these were the works of God, why should you deny in the matter of His nativity, what you admit in the matter of His works? Was He unable to contribute to His own nativity and advent what He did not refuse for the aid and profit of men?”

“Confess then how foolish and absurd your notion is that He could not ascend into heaven, although He had descended into earth, never to have been absent from heaven. It is strange to talk about whether it was possible for Him to leave the regions below and ascend to heaven to whom it was easy when still on earth, ever to continue in heaven. But what is that which He Himself says, ‘I ascend to my Father’ (John 20:17). Did He imply that in this Ascension there would be the intervention of Another’s help, who by the very fact that He said He would ascend, shows the effect of His own power? David also says of the Ascension of the Lord, ‘God ascended with a shout, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet’ (Psalm 47:5). He clearly explained the glory of Him who ascends by the power of the Ascension”.

² John Cassian, On the Incarnation of the Lord, VII, 4.

John Cassian, On the Incarnation of the Lord, VII, 22.

Vincent of Lerins stated³ that there was a unity of the Lord's person. His flesh was created while His Divinity came down from heaven. In this way, one can say that the Word of God was created, and the Virgin Mary can be called the Mother of God.

"It is written by divine guidance, on the one hand, that the Son of man came down from heaven; and on the other, that the Lord of glory was crucified on earth. Since the Lord's flesh was made, the Lord's flesh was created, and the very Word of God is said to have been made, the very omniscient Wisdom of God to have been created, just as prophetically His hands and His feet are described as having been pierced. From this unity of Person it follows, by reason of a like mystery, that, since the flesh of the Word was born of an undefiled mother, God the Word Himself is most catholically believed, most impiously denied, to have been born of the Virgin. This being the case, God forbid that any one should seek to defraud Holy Mary of her prerogative of divine grace and her special glory. By the singular gift of Him who is our Lord and God, and her own son, she is to be confessed most truly and most blessedly the mother of God, "Theotokos".

Gregory the Great added⁴ that Christ did not lose what He was in the Incarnation, but added what He was not; that is, human flesh. He remained one person.

"But we say that the Word was made flesh not by losing what He was, but by taking what He was not. For in the mystery of His Incarnation the Only-begotten of the Father increased what was ours, but diminished not what was His. Therefore the Word and the flesh is one Person, as He says Himself, No man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven (John 3:13). He Who is the Son of God in heaven was the Son of man who spoke on earth. Hence John says, We know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding" (1 John 5:20).

The Lifting Up of Christ

This "lifting up" goes back to Israel in the wilderness. The people rebelled against God and Moses; so the Lord sent "fiery snakes" among the people (Numbers 21:4-6). The term "fiery" refers to the burning and swelling that resulted from the snakes' venom. In other places (Isaiah 30:6) the same snake is referred to as a "fiery hooded snake". This narrows down the species of the snake to either an asp or a cobra.

When the people repented, the Lord told Moses to make a bronze replica of the snake and set it on a flagstaff (Numbers 21:7-9). Anyone who looked to the bronze snake lived. This bronze snake was very highly revered in later years, even to the point of cultic worship until reform-minded Hezekiah destroyed it 700 years later (2 Kings 18:1-4).

The snake on the pole is used today for two purposes, both associated with healing. First the snake on the pole is the symbol for the American Medical Association. Second, the snake on the pole is used as the image on the top of an Orthodox Bishop's staff, although the design is not the same as that of the AMA. The message is that anyone who looks to their Bishop will be healed.

³ Vincent of Lerins, The Commonitory, XV, 40.

⁴ Gregory the Great, Epistles, XI, 67.

Tertullian noted⁵ that the bronze serpent on the pole, along with the golden cherubim, were exceptions to the mandate prohibiting objects that could be made into idols.

“Likewise, when forbidding the likeness to be made of all things, which are in heaven, and in earth, and in the waters, He declared also the reasons, as prohibiting all materials that could exhibit a latent idolatry. For He adds, ‘You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them’ (Deuteronomy 5:8-9). The form, however, of the bronze serpent, which the Lord afterwards commanded Moses to make, did not give a pretext for idolatry, but was meant for the cure of those who were plagued with the fiery serpents (Numbers 21:8-9). Also the golden Cherubim and Seraphim were purely an ornament in the figured fashion of the ark (Exodus 25:18-21). They were made for ornamentation and were totally remote from all condition of idolatry, on account of which the making a likeness is prohibited”.

Since the Altar of Burnt Offering was also made of bronze (overlying wood), bronze has generally been regarded to speak of judgment. Paul spoke about how Christ, who knew no sin, was made to be sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:6). This is why Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). Thus Jesus became the snake on the pole. And in doing so, the handwriting against us in ordinances, which was contrary to us, has been taken out of the way and nailed to the Cross (Colossians 2:13-14). The term “handwriting in ordinances” was a legal term referring to a debt that had to be paid because of money deposited with or lent to a person by another to be returned at an appointed time. Another example of this debt is found in the parable of the slave⁶ who owed his king 10,000 talents (i.e. almost 400 tons) of silver.

Ambrose connected⁷ the serpents at the Exodus to the serpents in the wilderness. Christ, the rod (Isaiah 11:1, 4), became a serpent to devour the dread serpent. Lifted on the Cross as a serpent, He became healing medicine.

“Moses cast down his rod and it became a serpent which devoured the serpents of Egypt (Exodus 7:8-13); this signifying that the Word should become Flesh to destroy the poison of the dread serpent by the forgiveness and pardon of sins. For the rod stands for the Word that is true, royal, filled with power and glorious in ruling. The rod became a serpent; so He Who was the Son of God, begotten of the Father, became the Son of man born of a woman, and lifted, like the serpent, on the cross, poured His healing medicine on the wounds of man. Wherefore the Lord Himself says, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up’” (John 3:14).

Basil the Great stated⁸ that while the manna was a type of the living bread that came down from heaven (John 6:49, 51), the serpent on the standard (Numbers 21:9, John 3:14) was a type of the passion of salvation accomplished by means of the cross, where those who even looked at it were preserved.

⁵ Tertullian, The Five Books Against Marcion, II, ii, 2, 22.

⁶ See the Gospel lesson for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost (Matthew 18:23-35).

⁷ Ambrose of Milan, Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy, III, xv, 94.

⁸ Basil, On the Spirit, XIV, 31.

John Chrysostom comments⁹ on the lifting up of the Son of Man thus: “But why did He not say plainly, I am about to be crucified, instead of referring His hearer to the ancient type?” Three reasons:

1. “So that you may learn that the old things are akin to new, and that the one is not alien to the other.”
2. “So that you may know that He came willingly to His passion”.
3. “So you may learn that no harm arises to Him from the fact and that salvation springs from it for many”.

Events Accompanying the Lord’s Being Lifted Up

As Jesus died on the cross, several events also occurred in Jerusalem and around the world. From the sixth to the ninth hours (noon to 3:00 p.m.) there was darkness all over the earth (Luke 23:44-45). Dionysius the Aeropagite, whom Paul converted in Athens on his second missionary journey in 50 AD (Acts 17:34), was in Egypt when the sun was darkened. As an unbeliever, he cried out¹⁰, “Either God, the Creator of the world, is suffering, or the world is ending!”.

In addition to the darkness, the veil of the Temple separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). This thick veil had been embroidered for the newly renovated Temple around 5 BC and the Virgin Mary as a skilled weaver had helped with its construction along with four other young virgins at the Temple¹¹. The High Priest under Mosaic Law was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies (beyond the veil) only once per year on the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:1-7, Leviticus 16:29-34). With the veil torn, we now have a confidence to enter the Holy of Holies by a new and living way (Hebrews 10:19-22). The veil was Christ’s flesh, and He consecrated this for us at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20). As we enter the Holy of Holies at the Eucharist to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24), it is important that we avoid doing so in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27).

In addition to the darkness and the split veil, there was also a major earthquake, high enough on the Richter scale to split rocks (Matthew 27:51). As a result of the earthquake, graves carved into rocks were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised (Matthew 27:52-53). Among those raised¹² were the Prophet Daniel and his three co-workers Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah¹³. All these appeared to many in Jerusalem before dying again (Matthew 27:53). Some of those who were raised¹⁴ even testified before the Sanhedrin. The centurion in charge of the crucifixion and the tomb was named Longinus; his reaction to all these events was, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54). Longinus and two of his soldiers refused to take the bribe offered by the Sanhedrin (minus Joseph and Nicodemus). Instead they resigned their commission and left for Cappadocia. To silence their testimony, the Sanhedrin had them hunted down and beheaded¹⁵.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXVII, 2.

¹⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 3.

¹¹ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, Buena Vista, CO, 81211, 1989, pg. 71.

¹² Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 17.

¹³ We know them more commonly by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-dego (Daniel 1:7).

¹⁴ See the New Testament Apocryphal document “The Gospel of Nicodemus”, Chapters xx-xx, in Roberts and Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

¹⁵ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 16.

Velimirovic comments¹⁶ that this was a terrible rebuke to mankind. Inanimate creation was more aware than human understanding darkened by sin

“Oh what a terrible rebuke to man! Lifeless nature recognized Him whom we were not able to recognize. The whole of mute creation trembled and stood up in protest in its own way and with its own language. The mute earth quaked -- that is its language. The rocks are rent -- that is their language. The sun withholds its light -- that is its language. The whole of creation protests in its own way, for the whole creation is obedient, as Adam was once in Paradise. The whole creation knows Him, as Adam did in Paradise. How is it that irrational creation knew Him and was obedient to Him, we do not know. It is some sort of inner instinct of creation, which came to it by the Word of God by which it was made. This instinct of creation is of greater worth than human understanding that is darkened by sin. Of all that exists, nothing is blinder than human understanding when darkened by sin. For it not only does not see that which it was created to see, but sees that which is contrary to being, contrary to God, contrary to truth”.

Results of the Lord Being Lifted Up

Crucifixion in the 1st Century Roman world meant utter humiliation; this is especially so in Jesus' case. Consider the crown of thorns, the robe, the reed, the blows, the smiting on the cheek, the spitting, the unjust “trial”, the irony, the nails, the nakedness, the spear, etc. Yet the Scriptures speak of the crucifixion as being Jesus' glorification (John 12:23-24). This is 180 degrees different from most peoples' thinking, which is why Satan misunderstood also (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). And this is the focus of the Word of the Cross.

Much Grain Produced:

In connection with His glorification on the cross, Jesus also said “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24). The illustration here is the germination of a seed that is planted. Once in the ground, the seed itself contains enough to get the plant started. But once the roots of the plant get established, the seed dies and is dwarfed by the plant. And many kernels of wheat -- each of which is another seed -- are produced on the stalk of the plant, where each new seed contains the same life as the original seed. If the seed never dies, it never germinates and the plant doesn't grow. The seed just remains alone as a seed.

In connection with this, John recorded Jesus' announcement at the Feast of Tabernacles: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). Then John remarks: “This He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39). It was for this purpose that Jesus came to the hour of His crucifixion (John 12:27). And having bought with a price those who had fallen, and made their body a Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), the new kernels of wheat now have the same life as the original seed given as a down payment (2 Corinthians 5:5; Ephesians 1:14).

¹⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue from Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, March 28.

Judgment of the World:

After Jesus stated that He came to the world for the cross (John 12:27), He said, “Father, glorify Your Name”. The Father then spoke from heaven with a voice of thunder (John 12:28-29). Jesus said, “This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world¹⁷; now the ruler of this world (*kosmos*) will be cast down” (John 12:30-31).

Augustine of Hippo commented¹⁸ that Christ conquered the devil by the devil’s own trophy, which was death. By putting Christ to death, even though he found in Him nothing that deserved death, the devil violated Divine justice.

“The method by which man was surrendered to the devil’s power ought not to be understood in the sense that it was the result of God’s command: rather He permitted it, but He did so with justice. When God deserted the sinner (without withholding His mercies), the instigator of the sin rushed in. Therefore God decided that to rescue man from the devil’s power, justice should overcome the devil, not power. And what is the justice by which the devil has been conquered? Surely it is the justice of Christ. And how has he been conquered? Because the devil put Christ to death although he found in Him nothing that deserved death! ‘The prince of this world is coming, and he finds nothing (that is, no sin) in Me. But that the world may know that I am doing My Father’s will, arise, let us go from here’ (John 14:30-32). From there He went to His passion. What could be more just than to go as far as the death of the cross for the sake of justice? First justice conquered the devil, because He had no sin and was most unjustly put to death by the devil. Then power conquered death by rising from the dead and ascending to heaven with the same flesh in which He was slain. Power would have overcome the devil even if Christ could not have been put to death by him; and yet it showed greater power to conquer death itself by resurrection than to avoid it by continuing to live.”

“The devil was conquered by his own trophy of victory (that is death). By seducing the first man (Adam), he slew him: by slaying the last man (Christ), he lost the first from his snare.”

John Chrysostom also comments¹⁹: “How then is the world judged in Christ? It shall be said, (as if a court of justice were sitting) to Satan: ‘Well, you have slain all men because you found them guilty of sin. But why did you slay Christ? Is it not clear that you did it wrongfully?’ Therefore in Him the whole world shall be avenged”. In other words, the devil was judged by his own standards as the accuser of the brethren.

God’s Love for the World

The overriding concern that Christ had in becoming incarnate was a love for His creation. We see this in His healing countless numbers of the sick (Luke 4:30) and in the feeding of the 5000 even though He was tired and needed rest (Mark 6:31-42).

¹⁷ That is, Greek: *kosmos* = *world order*.

¹⁸ Augustin of Hippo, The Power and the Blood of Christ. Of the Trinity 13 and Sermon 261

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXVII, 2.

Ambrose of Milan pointed out²⁰ that while the Father sent the Son to the Cross, this was not to punishment but to grace. The Son went to the Cross willingly out of love for us.

“So, then, the Father gave the Son, and the Son gave Himself. Love is preserved and due affection is not wronged, for affection is not wronged where there is no distress in the giving up. He gave one Who was willing, He gave One Who offered Himself; the Father did not give the Son to punishment but to grace. If you inquire into the merit of the deed, inquire into the description of the affection. Paul shows plainly the unity of this divine love, because both the Father gave the Son and the Son gave Himself. The Father gave, Who ‘spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32). And of the Son he also says, ‘Who gave Himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). If it was of grace, what is there for me to find fault with? If He suffered wrongly, I owe the more”.

Leo the Great pointed out²¹ the Lord’s meticulous planning of His passion, and His committing it to the safekeeping of His disciples. This shows that everything was an act of love.

“It should not be thought that the Lord Jesus wished to escape the Passion and the Death, the sacraments of which He had already committed to His disciples’ keeping, seeing that He Himself forbid Peter, when he was burning with devoted faith and love, to use the sword, saying, ‘The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?’ (John 18:11) Seeing that that is certain which the Lord also says, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life’ (John 3:16). The Apostle Paul says, ‘Christ loved us and gave Himself for us, a victim to God for a sweet-smelling savor’ (Ephesians 5:2). For the saving of all through the Cross of Christ was the common will and the common plan of the Father and the Son. This had been mercifully determined and unchangeably fore-ordained before eternal ages, and could not by any means be disturbed”.

John Chrysostom noted²² not just the love of God, but His dignity and free will in stooping to the Incarnation.

“Thus it appears, that the ministry, which He undertook, was free and uncompelled; that He delivered Himself up, not by another. Let us not therefore misinterpret the words of John, ‘that the Father gave His only-begotten Son’ (John 3:16) for us. We should not be led by this to detract from the dignity of the Only Begotten. Do not infer from this that He is only human. For the Father is said to have given Him, not as implying that the Son’s ministry was a servile one, but to teach us that it seemed good to the Father. Paul too has shown that this is, ‘According to the will of our God, and Father’ (Galatians 1:4). He doesn’t say, ‘by the command’, but ‘according to the will’, for inasmuch as there is an unity of will in the Father and the Son, that which the Son wills, the Father wills also”.

Reconciling the World to Christ:

As Jesus spoke about the judgment of this world, He also said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). Paul spoke of this a number of times: “because in Him all the fullness (that is, of God) was pleased to dwell, and through Him to

²⁰ Ambrose of Milan, Three Books on the Holy Spirit, I, xii, 129.

²¹ Leo the Great, Sermons, LVIII, 4.

²² John Chrysostom, Commentary on Galatians, Chapter 1, v. 4.

reconcile all things to Himself, through Him whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His Cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

Speaking about Jews (who had received the oracles of God) versus Gentiles, Paul also said: “to create the two in Himself into one new man, thus making peace, that He might reconcile both in one body to God through the Cross, because through Him, we both have access by One Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:15-18). John Chrysostom commented²³ that this does not mean that the Gentiles were raised to the high heritage that belonged to the commonwealth of the Jews, but that He has raised both to one yet higher.

Not only were Jews and Gentiles reconciled, but both were given the deaconate of reconciliation themselves, since both are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. “Now all things are of God who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the deaconate of reconciliation. That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not reckoning their trespasses to them and has committed to us the Word (Greek: *logos*) of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors on behalf of Christ as God (the Father) beseeching through us: we beg on behalf of Christ, ‘Be you reconciled to God’ “ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Chrysostom commented²⁴,

“For we have succeeded to His functions. But if this appears to you a great thing, hear what follows also. He shows they do this not only on Christ’s behalf but also on behalf of the Father.

Thus the reconciliation of the world to Christ encompasses not only everything in heaven and earth but also uses those who are the fruit of the One grain of wheat (that fell in the ground and died) as the chief reconcilers. On the Sunday after the Exaltation, we will see how their mission requires that they imitate their Master and die also.

²³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, V, vv 13-15.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, IX, 5.

The Cross Can Be Offensive

September 13, 2009

Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Cross

Revision G

Epistle: Galatians 6:11-18

Peter wrote to beware of “your adversary the devil, who walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Do we ever wonder why? He’s been judged and outsmarted by the Cross and he knows his time is limited (Revelation 12:12). Is it any wonder then, that Paul spoke of people whose allegiance was to Satan and who were “enemies of the Cross of Christ”? (Philippians 3:18).

In today’s Epistle lesson, Paul addressed a situation where some Jewish Christians insisted that the Gentiles be circumcised (Galatians 6:12), even though James and the Apostles in Jerusalem had already written to all the Gentile churches that this wasn’t necessary (Acts 15:13-29). Why would they do this? Perhaps due to the strong influence worldwide of the Pharisees in Jerusalem who insisted on it. Paul said that they do this “only that they may not suffer persecution for the Cross of Christ” (Galatians 6:12). Much of the persecution Paul experienced came at the hands of the Jewish leaders or was instigated by them. Thus these Jewish Christians Paul wrote about chose to offend God rather than men, and just to avoid taking up their cross.

Crucified to the World

Paul stated that he was “crucified to the world and the world to him” (Galatians 6:14). What he means by this is that he has abandoned all benefits of the life in the flesh, and looks forward to his proper life with the saints in heaven. This is not a boast on Paul’s part; it is a simple statement of where he has placed his hope.

Moses had recorded the Lord’s word as, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength’, and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’, and Christ repeated the same thing²⁵. The Patriarchs, who lived before Moses, knew this and followed the Lord’s direction without the need of written laws. When Christ came, He clarified what He had said to Moses and the Patriarchs. Throughout His three-year ministry, He repeatedly mentioned that the “Word of the Cross” was a way of life. For example, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12). And again, “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27, Mark 8:34). What does this mean?

John Chrysostom considered²⁶ what were the implications when Paul said, ‘I have been crucified to the world, and the world to me’. Simply put, Paul’s life in the flesh was an altered one, and he was hastening on to another life.

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²⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:37-40.

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philippians, III, v. 21.

“The word ‘life’ is very significant as is the word ‘death’. There is this life of the body, there is the life of sin (Romans 6:2). On one hand, it is possible to live the life of sin. On the other hand, there is the life everlasting and immortal, ‘for our citizenship is in heaven’ (Philippians in 20). There is also the life of the body of which he speaks, ‘through Him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). Paul acknowledges that he lives the natural life, but denies the life of sin, which other men live. He who does not desire the present life, who is hastening to another life, who despises death, and who desires nothing, how does he live this life? For as one made of adamant²⁷, though he were struck a thousand blows, would never be bothered by it. It is no longer the old man; as he said, ‘Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me out of the body of this death!’ (Romans 7:24) How does he live who does nothing for the sake of food, clothing, or for any of these present things? Such a one does not live the natural life; if he takes no thought for the things, which sustain life, he does not live it. Paul did not live it; he busied himself with none of the things of this life”.

“Paul shows that he accepts the natural life. ‘The life which I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). That is, I live a certain new life, an altered one. Think not that I shall be deprived of this life, for neither while alive did I live this life, but that which Christ willed. For tell me, he who despises money, luxury, hunger, thirst, dangers, health, safety, does he live this life? He who has nothing here, and is oftentimes willing to cast life away, if need be, and does not cling to it, does he live this life? By no means! Consider an example. Let us imagine someone with great wealth, with many servants, and much gold, but who makes no use of all these things. Is such a person rich for all his wealth? No! Let him see his children dissipating his property, strolling idly about; let him feel no concern for them. When beaten let him not even think about the pain. Shall we call him a man of wealth? By no means, even though his wealth is his own. ‘To me to live is Christ’; if you will inquire into my life, it is He. ‘And to die is gain’ (Philippians 1:21). Why? Because I shall more clearly be present with Him; so that my death is rather a coming to life! They who kill me will work on me no dreadful thing, they will only send me onward to my proper life, and free me from that which is not mine”.

Chrysostom also compared²⁸ the Christian life to birds soaring too high to be trapped by fowlers. Birds are easily caught in nets when they fly low, where the devil is a fowler with nets to ensnare Christians in the things of this world.

“Often a wife, children, friend, neighbor have proved a snare to the unheeding! And why, it is asked, are there so many snares? That we may not fly low, but seek the things that are above. For just as birds, as long as they stay in the upper air, are not easily caught; so also you, as long as you look to things above, will not be easily captured, whether by a snare, or by any other device. The devil is a fowler. Soar, then, too high for his arrows. The man who has mounted aloft will no longer admire anything in the affairs of this life. But when we have ascended to the top of the mountains, the city and its walls seem to us to be small, and the men appear to us to be going along upon the earth like ants. So

²⁷ Adamant was a very hard legendary material, possible associated with diamond.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, The Homilies on the Statutes, XV, 8.

when you have ascended to the heights of spiritual wisdom, nothing upon the earth will be able to fascinate you. Everything, even riches, glory, honor, and whatever else there be of that kind, will appear insignificant when you regard heavenly things. According to Paul all the glories of the present life appeared trifling, and more unprofitable than dead things. Therefore his exclamation, ‘The world is crucified to me’ (Galatians 6:14). Therefore also his admonition, ‘Set your affections on things above’. That is, ‘Where Christ sits at the right hand of God’” (Colossians 3:1).

Chrysostom, referring to the saints and prophets who wandered about and of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:37-38), compared²⁹ their situation to that of people in his day. The saints were citizens of heaven but many people of his day were unwilling to be separated from the things on earth.

“The saints and prophets called themselves therefore ‘strangers’; but Paul went beyond this. Not merely did he call himself a stranger to this world, but said that he was dead to the world, and that the world was dead to him. ‘For the world has been crucified to me and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14). But we busy ourselves about everything here in this world as active citizens. And what righteous men were to the world, i.e. as ‘strangers’ and ‘dead’, that we are to Heaven. And what they were to Heaven, i.e. as active citizens, that we are to the world. Therefore we are dead, because we have refused that which is truly life, and have chosen this, which is transitory. We have provoked God to wrath, because when the enjoyments of Heaven have been set before us, we are not willing to be separated from things on earth. Like worms, we turn about from the earth to the earth. In short, we are not willing to look up even for a little while, nor to withdraw ourselves from human affairs, but as if drowned in sleep and drunkenness, we are stupefied with imaginary things”.

Gregory of Nyssa, speaking of Paul’s words, “As many of us as were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death” (Romans 6:3), compared³⁰ our life to that of a corpse. Just as a corpse does not seek the things of this life, so should we be.

“Now if we have been conformed to His death, sin from now on in us is surely a corpse, pierced through by the javelin of Baptism, as that fornicator was thrust through by the zealous Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-8). Flee therefore from us, ill-omened one! It is a corpse you seek to destroy, one long ago joined to you, one who long since lost his senses for pleasures. A corpse is not attracted to beautiful bodies, or captivated by wealth. A corpse does not slander and lie, snatch at what is not its own, or revile those who encounter it. My way of living is regulated for another life. I have learned to despise the things that are in the world, to pass by the things of earth, to hasten to the things of heaven, even as Paul expressly testifies, that the world is crucified to him, and he to the world (Galatians 6:14). These are the words of a soul truly regenerated. These are the utterances of the newly-baptized man, who remembers his own profession, which he made to God when the sacrament was administered to him, promising for the sake of love towards Him that he would despise all torment and all pleasure alike”.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXIV, 1.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Baptism of Christ, A Sermon for the Day of the Lights”, in Oratorical Works, V.

Clement of Alexandria stated³¹ that death should be a freeing of the soul to a better life with God. Many times, however, death is only a strengthening of the chains that tie a person to the body and judgment.

“‘Death’ is the result of fellowship of the soul, in a state of sin, with the body; and ‘life’ the result of separation from sin. Many are the stakes and ditches of lust, which impede us, and the pits of wrath and anger, which must be leaped over. We must avoid many machinations of those who plot against us, who would no longer see the knowledge of God ‘through a mirror’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Scripture views as slaves those ‘under sin’ and ‘sold to sin’ (Romans 6:6-20), the lovers of pleasure and of the body. They are beasts rather than men, ‘those who have become like cattle and horses, neighing after their neighbors’ wives’ (Jeremiah 5:8). The licentious is ‘the lustful ass’, the covetous is the ‘savage wolf’, and the deceiver is ‘a serpent’. The severance, therefore, of the soul from the body, made a life-long study, produces a cheerful readiness in the Christian, so that he is easily able to bear natural death, which is the dissolution of the chains, which bind the soul to the body. ‘For the world is crucified to me, and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14), the Apostle says; ‘and now I live, though in the flesh, as having my conversation in heaven’ (Philippians 3:20).

Boasting or Glorifying in the Cross

Paul also spoke of boasting in the Cross (Galatians 6:14). This can be done simply by displaying the Cross in our homes and altars, by venerating the Cross in Church and by making the sign of the Cross. Chrysostom expressed³² another aspect:

“And what is the boast of the Cross? That Christ for my sake took on Him the form of a slave, and bore His sufferings for me, the slave, the enemy, the ungrateful one; He even so loved me as to give Himself up to a curse for me. What can be comparable to this! Let us then not be ashamed of His unspeakable tenderness; He was not ashamed of being crucified for our sake, and will we be ashamed to confess His infinite solicitude?”

Chrysostom also stated³³ that we have spectators in heaven, and we should be careful not to provoke the Master. Praise and flattery from those at enmity with God is like the taunts of children at play. The only thing worthy of glory is humility.

“It is then a sad thing, and replete with disgrace of every kind, to be in love with glory in civil matters. But when in spiritual things you are in the same plight, what excuse is there for you, when you do not give God even as much honor as you get yourself from your servants? For even the slave ‘looks to the eyes of his master’ (Psalm 123:2), and the hireling to his employer, who is to pay him wages, and the disciple to his master. But you do just the contrary. Having left the God that hired you, you look to your fellow servants; and this knowing that God remembers your well doings even after this life, but man only remembers the present. And when you have spectators assembled in Heaven, you are gathering together spectators upon earth. And where the wrestler struggles,

³¹ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 3.

³² John Chrysostom, Commentary on Galatians, chapter 6.

³³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XVII, v. 1.

there he wants to be honored; but while your wrestling is above, you are anxious to gain a crown below. And what can be worse than madness like this?"

"But let us look at the crowns also. For one is formed by haughtiness and a second by grudging against another, and a third by flattery, another by wealth, and another by servile obedience. Like children at their childish play put crowns of grass upon one another, and many a time laugh at him that is crowned behind his back. They that pass their praises upon you, many a time joke by themselves at their putting the grass upon us. How many would you have to praise you; ten thousand? These are no better than so many crows cawing from the sky. Taking the assembly of the angels into consideration, these will seem viler than worms and their good word no better than a cobweb".

"Hear then how Paul, who saw through these things thoroughly, is so far from seeking after them, that he even belittles them, in the words 'But God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of Christ' (Galatians 6:14). This glory let us emulate, that we may not provoke the Master, because in seeking worldly glory we are insulting God, and not our self. For if you were a painter, and had some pupil, and he were to omit showing you his practice of the art, but set forth his painting publicly just to anybody that chanced to observe it, you would not take it quietly. But if this with your fellow servants was an insult, how much more with the Master! Remember to say to your soul as Paul did, 'Do you not know that we shall judge angels?' (1 Corinthians 6:3) You that judge the angels, will you let yourself be judged by off scourging, and be praised by dancers, mimics, gladiators and horse-drivers?"

Chrysostom went on³⁴ to compare the lust of unbelievers for their passions to the love of a believer for his God. Each seeks a kind of glory, one temporary the other eternal.

"Those who cherish earthly passion, which men call love, think nothing glorious or precious, but concentrate on those things which tend to gratify their lust. Their mistress is everything to them. Much more do those, who have been taken captive by this heavenly love, think nothing of the cost. For if anyone is caught with the fire of Christ's love, he becomes like a man who dwelt alone on the earth, so utterly does he care less for glory or disgrace. As for trials, he so despises them, both scourges and imprisonments, as though the body in which he suffers these things were another's and not his own, or as though he had a body made of adamant. As for the sweet things of this life, he so laughs them to scorn, is so insensitive to them, as we are insensitive to dead bodies, being ourselves dead. He is as far from being taken captive by any passion, as the gold refined in the fire and purified is free from alloy. For even as flies would not dart into the midst of a flame, but fly from it, so the passions dare not even to come near this man".

"Take the Apostle Paul as an example. Observe how he felt towards the whole world. 'The world is crucified to me and I unto the world' (Galatians 6:14). 'I am dead to the world, and the world is dead to me'. And again, 'It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me'" (Philippians 2:20).

³⁴ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, LII, 25:23.

Enemies of the Cross

Paul spoke of people whose allegiance was to Satan and who were “enemies of the Cross of Christ”? (Philippians 3:18). John Chrysostom endeavored to define³⁵ what Paul meant by “Enemies of the Cross”. By seeking the comforts and pleasures of this world, making a pretense of Christianity and refusing to acknowledge the Cross, people become enemies of the Cross.

“Nothing is so incongruous in a Christian, and foreign to his character, as to seek ease and rest; to be engrossed with the present life is foreign to our profession and enlistment. Your Master was crucified, and do you seek ease? Your Master was pierced with nails, and do you live delicately? Do these things become a noble soldier? Paul said, ‘Many walk, of whom I told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ’ (Philippians 3:18). There were some, who made a pretense of Christianity, yet lived in ease and luxury, and this is contrary to the Cross; therefore he thus spoke. The cross belongs to a soul at its post for the fight, seeking nothing like ease, while their conduct is of the contrary sort. So that even if they say, they are Christ’s, still they are, as it were, enemies of the Cross. If they loved the Cross, they would strive to live the crucified life. Crucify yourself, not that you may slay yourself, God forbid, for that is a wicked thing, but as Paul said, ‘The world has been crucified to me and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14). If you love your Master, die to the things of this world like He did”.

“Learn how great is the power of the Cross; how many good things it has achieved, and does still; how it is the safety of our life; through it everything is done. Baptism is through the Cross, for we must receive that seal. The laying on of hands is through the Cross. If we are on journeys, if we are at home, wherever we are, the Cross is a great good, the armor of salvation, a shield that cannot be beaten down, a weapon to oppose the devil. You bear the Cross, when you are at enmity with the devil, not simply when you seal yourself by it, but when you suffer the things belonging to the Cross. Christ thought fit to call our sufferings by the name of the Cross. As when he said, ‘Except a man take up his cross and follow Me’ (Matthew 16:24), i.e. except he be prepared to die”.

“But these who are engrossed with the present life, and lovers of their bodies, are enemies of the Cross. And everyone, who is a friend of luxury, and of present safety, is an enemy of that Cross in which Paul makes his boast, which he embraces, with which he desires to be incorporated. As when he said, ‘I am crucified to the world, and the world to me’ (Galatians 6:14). But here he said, ‘I now tell you weeping’ (Philippians 3:18). Why? The evil was urgent, and it deserved tears. Truthfully, the luxurious are worthy of tears, who fatten the body, and take no thought of that soul which must give account. Behold you live delicately, behold you are drunken, today and tomorrow, ten years, twenty, thirty, fifty. What is the end? What is the gain? Nothing at all! Does it not then deserve tears, and lamentations, to lead such a life? God has brought us into this course, that He may crown us, and we take our departure without doing any noble action. Therefore Paul weeps, where others laugh, and live in pleasure. So sympathetic is he; he takes thought for all men. ‘Whose God is the belly’ (Philippians 3:19). For this they have a God! That is, ‘let us eat and drink!’ (1

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Philippians, XIII.

Corinthians 15:32, Isaiah 22:13) Do you see, how great an evil luxury is? To some their wealth, and to others their belly is a God. Are not these too idolaters, and worse than the common? And their ‘glory is in their shame’” (1 Corinthians 15:32).

To get a better insight into this, it is helpful to understand the reference to the “needle’s eye gate” of many ancient cities. The “needle’s eye gate” was a small, low door beside the main gate. Such a feature existed on at least one of the gates of Jerusalem and Damascus³⁶. A man could fit easily through the “needle’s eye gate”, but a camel, being a large animal, could not fit easily. If the camel’s pack (which could weight up to 1,000 pounds) were removed and the camel were made to kneel, the camel could just barely crawl through the “needle’s eye gate.”

Jesus stated that it is easier for a camel to go through the needle’s eye gate than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Like the camel, the rich man first needs to unload his pack or burden. The parable of the sower refers to this pack as “the cares of this world, the deceit of riches, the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) and the pleasures of life (Luke 8:14). These are things that appeal to our flesh and which can lead us away from God. Some of the early disciples, like Barnabas, sold a large amount of property and brought the entire proceeds to the Twelve (Acts 4:34-37). Ananias and Sapphria on the other hand, were caught in the deceit of riches and held back part of the proceeds – and paid dearly (Acts 5:1-10).

This does not mean that no Christian can be rich. The Patriarch Job was very wealthy (Job 1:1-3, 42:12-17), yet the Lord referred to him as a blameless and upright man who had no peers in his righteousness (Job 1:8, 2:3). The key here is discerning the deceitfulness of wealth and the strength of its pull on one’s heart. Job was able to let his pack be taken off without remorse. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord” (Job 1:21; also Job 2:9-10). Many Christians throughout the ages have been unable or unwilling to continue fighting this pull and have taken oaths of poverty to thrust a sword (so to speak) into the heart of the demon of wealth.

Chrysostom marveled³⁷ and was humbled not at the miracles performed by the Apostle Paul, but by the chains and abuse he endured. Here was a man who performed incredible miracles everywhere he went, yet he was chained up like a common criminal, because of the urging of his enemies. Did these “enemies of the Cross”, that he dealt with, have any idea who Paul was? When Paul is honored at the Resurrection, and their deeds are reviewed, there may be some embarrassment on their part.

“Oh! Those blessed hands, which that chain adorned! Not so worthy were Paul’s hands when they lifted up and raised the lame man at Lystra (Acts 14:10), as when they were bound with those chains (Acts 28:20). Do you marvel at Paul, when the viper fastened on his hand, and did him no harm? (Acts 28:3) Don’t marvel; it revered his chain. The whole sea revered it also; for then too was he bound, when he was saved from shipwreck (Acts 27:13-44). Were any one to grant me power to raise the dead at this moment, I would not choose that power, but this chain. If I were free from the cares of the Church, if my body was strong and vigorous, I would not shrink from undertaking so long a journey, only

³⁶ Weiss, Insight into Bible Times and Customs, pp. 24-25.

³⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, VIII, v. 4:1.

for the sake of beholding those chains, for the sake of seeing the prison where he was bound. The traces indeed of his miracles are numerous in all parts of the world, yet they are not so dear as those of his scars (Galatians 6:17). In the Scriptures, he does not delight me as much when he is working miracles, as when he is suffering evil, being scourged, and dragged about. From his body were carried away handkerchiefs or aprons to use to heal the sick (Acts 19:12). Marvelous, truly marvelous, are these things, and yet not so marvelous as ‘When they had laid many stripes upon him, they cast him into prison’ (Acts 16:23). And again; being in bonds, ‘they were singing hymns to God’ (Acts 16:25). And again, ‘They stoned him, and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead’” (Acts 14:19).

“Do you know how mighty a thing an iron chain is for Christ’s sake, bound about His servant’s body? Listen to what Christ Himself said, ‘Blessed are you’ (Matthew 5:11). Why? When you raise the dead? No! When you shall heal the blind? Not at all! ‘When men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake’ (Matthew 5:11). Now, if being spoken evil of (i.e. only words) renders men blessed, what may being treated as evil (i.e. deeds also) achieve? Listen to what Paul himself said elsewhere, ‘Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness’ (2 Timothy 4:8). Yet more glorious than this crown is the chain; of this, Paul said, the Lord will count me worthy, and I am not inquisitive about those things. Enough it is for me to suffer evil for Christ’s sake. Let Him but grant me to say, that ‘I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ’ (Colossians 1:24), and I ask nothing further”.

John Chrysostom continued to say³⁸ that we are accountable for the blood of those entrusted to us, if we neglect them, even if they are enemies of the Cross. But there comes a time, after they have rejected us repeatedly, that their blood is on their own heads.

“Let us be ashamed, who though we have no preaching to occupy us, live in idleness. ‘And he disputed in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks’; but ‘when they opposed and blasphemed’ (Acts 18:4-6), he withdrew, by this expecting to draw them more. Why, having left that house, did he come to live next door to the synagogue? (Acts 18:7) Was it not for this? For it was not that he saw any danger here. But Paul having testified to them — not teaching now, but testifying — ‘having shaken his garments’, to terrify them not by word only but by action, said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads’ (Acts 18:6). He spoke more vehemently as having already persuaded many. ‘I am clean’. Thus we also are accountable for the blood of those entrusted to us, if we neglect them. ‘From this time forth I will go to the Gentiles’. So also when he says, ‘Henceforth let no man trouble me’ (Galatians 6:17), he says it to terrify. The punishment of Paul’s abandoning them did not terrify them, but it did sting them”.

Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on

³⁸ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXXIX, v. 18:4-7.

the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others*? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:44-48).

Offense of the Cross

Paul’s preaching of the Cross offended some people, and Paul was persecuted as a result (Galatians 5:11). Chrysostom also spoke³⁹ on the offense of the Cross. Jews demand a sign in the form of miracles, but the answer is the Cross; Greeks demand eloquent teaching, but the answer is again the Cross. By contraries, God has overcome, and by the things that offend people, He attracts to Himself those who are able to see beyond the first impression.

“Vast is the import of the things here spoken! For he means to say how by contraries God has overcome, and how the Gospel is not of man. What he says is something of this sort. When we say unto the Jews, ‘Believe’, they answer, ‘Raise the dead, heal the demoniacs, show us signs.’ But instead what do we say? That He was crucified, and died, who is preached. And this is enough, not only to fail in drawing over the unwilling, but even to drive away those who are willing. Nevertheless, it does not drive away, but attracts and holds and overcomes”.

“Again; the Greeks demand of us a rhetorical style, and the acuteness of sophistry. But we preach to these also the Cross: and that which, in the case of the Jews seemed to be weakness, this in the case of the Greeks is foolishness. We not only fail in producing what they demand, but also produce the very opposites of their demand. For the Cross is not a sign sought out by reasoning, but the opposite. It is not a proof of power, but a conviction of weakness; not a display of wisdom, but a suggestion of foolishness. They who seek for signs and wisdom not only don’t receive the things, which they ask, but hear the contrary to what they desire. And then, by means of contraries, they are persuaded; how is not the power of Him that is preached unspeakable? As if to someone tempest-tossed and longing for a haven, you were to show not a haven but another wilder portion of the sea, and so could make him follow with thankfulness? Or as if a physician could attract to himself the man that was wounded and in need of remedies, by promising to cure him not with drugs, but with burning him again! For this is a result of great power indeed. So also the Apostles prevailed, not simply without a sign, but by a thing, which seemed contrary to all the known signs. Which thing also Christ did in the case of the blind man. For when He healed him, He took away the blindness by a thing that increased it: i.e., He put on clay (John 9:6). Just as by means of clay He healed the blind man, so also by means of the Cross He brought the world to Himself. That certainly was adding an offense not taking an offense away. By means of the prophets again with a small piece of wood He raised up iron from the bottom of the river (2 Kings 6:5-7). In like manner also with the Cross He has drawn the world to Himself. You see now, it is proof of great power and wisdom, to convince by means of the things that speak directly against us. Thus the Cross seems to be matter of offense; and yet far from offending, it even attracts”.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, IV, 5.

Conclusion of the Word of the Cross, Part I

We have considered the first aspect of the Word of the Cross: the lifting up of the Son of Man and several aspects of the effects of the Cross. This was a mystery: announced by the Prophets, announced by Jesus as His reason for becoming incarnate, but yet Satan considered it foolishness. At His crucifixion, all of creation groaned. As a result of His passion:

- Much grain was produced -- the Holy Spirit in us.
- The world was judged along with its ruler (Satan).
- The world was reconciled to Christ.
- The Cross was established as a new standard, clarifying the words in the Mosaic Law regarding loving God and our neighbor.

Jesus may have been humiliated in the eyes of the world, but He suffered no permanent harm and accomplished quite a lot! On the Sunday after the Exaltation, we will see how we are to do the same and how we incur no permanent harm either.